Caste in India

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P. W. Perfitt

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Aided by old books, guided by the precious remains of the oldest Sanscrit literature, we direct our attention to society as it formerly existed in Hindostan, and soon discover that it was divided into four classes, or "Castes," severally known as the Brahmins, or learned class; the Cshatryas, or military class; the Veisyas, or class devoted to either agriculture or merchant life; and lastly, the Sudras, or labouring class. These four were the only "legal Castes," but now there are several others, and the original four are more or less modified. When the sacred Vedas, the Vedanta, and even the Institutes of Menu were in their youthful glory, then no other Castes were tolerated — all mixtures were impure, and it was believed that no heavier curse could descend from Brahma upon the land, than that which would be involved in the commixture of its inhabitants. Doubtless in our times, many a pious Brahmin frequently quotes the verse from the Veda, relating to the misery which invariably follows after any mixed marriages; and cites it as a sort of explanation of the existing disorganisation of his country; for he, too, like the Hebrews of old, believes in the immediate superintendence of God; but their beliefs are only alike in form, in spirit their feud is exceedingly bitter. The Castes of old can hardly be said to exist at the present time, at least not in anything like purity, any more than our Norman nobility exists in purity and unity of blood. The class of marriages dictated by prudence proves to be a sad poison to the pure blood of all the Howards or Fitzalwins; but still the greatest families swallow the nauseous dose, because they are compensated by the gain of wealth ; and in this it is to be confessed that the Hindoos have shewn themselves to be human, they have allowed wealth, or worldly power and authority to creep in, and these, as is their way, have operated to the destruction of what is denominated the religious purity of Caste.

The Sudra, or lower caste man, was informed by his teachers that it was his duty to serve the Brahmin. He was born to serve, and in this life, as the theory was, he must

ever be a servant. He could serve others, but never in preference to the Brahmin; and whenever one of that Caste gave him an order, he was bound to obey the command. Still he was not a slave, he had rights and privileges none dared to invade, and slavery was unknown to the Hindoo system. Indeed, the Sudra enjoyed a species of liberty in one particular, which was denied to all the other Castes. They were bound, under all circumstances, to remain in Hindostan ; but he enjoyed liberty to go where he pleased.

> Let the three first classes invariably dwell in those before-mentioned countries; but a Sudra, distressed for subsistence, may sojourn whereever he chooses.[1]

But he was not permitted to become rich, to acquire great landed property, or to touch any of the sacred books or utensils — not even allowed to commit to memory any passages from the Vedas or Puranas, and was punished by being made to drink hot oil for disobedience in any of these particulars. In words he was the unclean and unholy, and his touch rendered a Brahmin's vessels forever impure; but it seems that he was withal as proud of his Caste, as were the members of the highest, for he looked not to those above him, but to the Pariahs and outcasts below him, who could not be received, or kindly treated, by any respectable members of the community. Whereas a Sudra — contradictory though it may appear, — could become King; and, even in the days of Menu, this had several times occurred, as we discover by what is written in his laws.

In some particulars, however, the position of the Sudra was better than that of the Veisyas. This latter Caste occupied but a poor position, for we find the direction given to the Brahmin that,

> Even to a merchant or labourer approaching his house in the manner of guests, let him give food with his domestics, shewing, at the same time, marks of benevolence.[2]

Thus he was not fit company for the Brahmin, and was treated as one to whom charity could be extended without any marks of disgrace. A Sudra, in fact, though not in name.

The Cshatryas, or military class, stood far removed above the two we have named, and, according to the theory, their right to the crown was as indisputable, as their authority with the sword. But they were the statesmen, as well as the soldiers. All the ordinary business of government rested upon them, and men of a lower Caste dared not interfere. They were in a state exactly like the Barons of the middle ages,

[1] Menu, ii., 21/91 (page numbers are just approximations as original source is unreadable).
[2] Menu, iii., 112 (page numbers are just approximations as original source is unreadable).

and abused their power quite as largely. A remarkable illustration of their positive relation to the other Castes is found in the fact, that money lent to a Brahmin was charged with two per cent interest, three per cent was charged to the Cshatryas, four per cent to the Veisyas, while the Sudra was compelled to pay his five per cent.

The Brahmins composed the highest Caste, and were presumed to be much more nearly related to heaven than any other. They were the "twice born," of men who had lived before, and who faithfully performed their duties as members of the other Castes — now, as Brahmins, they were passing through their final stage of human life, prior to their entrance into heaven, and their final absorption. Properly speaking, they were not priests, but were better acquainted with the "Scriptures" than the members of the other Castes — indeed, Brahma had specially endowed them with power to understand the Sacred Writings. They surrendered themselves through above one-half their life to meditation, fasting, and study; and hence were supposed able to give better advice than could be obtained from others. In theory, the King always allowed himself to be guided by them. But he was only to take their advice — not their money. The laws of Menu expressly set forth, that the "King, even though dying with want, must not receive any tax from a Brahmin learned in the Vedas." The monarchs managed to read that clause in the reverse sense, — the same as our ministers have read the passages "take no thought for to-morrow," and "take neither purse or scrip," — and so would take the coveted money.

They occasionally conducted for themselves, and for members of the military and merchant Castes, the great ceremonies, and offered sacrifices, "but they never, like the priests of other nations — not excluding the Hebrew — conducted public worship, — worship for individuals indiscriminately, worship in temples, or offerings to idols." The Brahmin who makes offerings to idols, is looked upon as degraded, and unfit to be invited to religious feasts. A wealthy Brahmin is bound to be very liberal in giving, and must abandon the whole of his property in the prime of manhood, in order to lead a life of religious solitude and meditation. Indeed, as Wilson has very clearly shown, the whole tenor of the rules for the conduct of a Brahmin, is to exclude him from everything like worldly enjoyment, from riches, and from temporal power. The first part of his life he must spend as a student, and, in the Institutes of Mena, the following directions are given for his guidance.

> These following rules must a Brahmin-student observe, while he dwells with his preceptor; keeping all his passions under control, for the sake of increasing his habitual devotion. Day by day, having bathed, and being purified, let him offer fresh water to the Gods, the Sages, and the Manes; let him show respect to the images of the deities, and bring wood for the oblation to fire. Let him abstain from honey,

> from flesh-meat, from perfumes, from chaplets of flowers, from sweet vegetable juices, from women, from all sweet substances turned acid, and from doing an injury to animated beings; from unguents for his limbs, and from black powder for his eyes, from wearing sandals, and from carrying an umbrella; from wrath, from covetousness, from dancing, and from vocal and instrumental music. From gaming, from disputes, from detraction, from falsehood, from embracing or wantonly looking at women, and from disservice to other men. Let him sleep constantly alone. ... Let him carry water pots, flowers, fresh earth, and cusa-grass, as much as may be useful to his teacher; and let him perform every day the duty of a religious mendicant. Each day must a Brahmin-student receive his food by begging, with due care, from the houses of persons renowned for discharging their duties, and not deficient in performing the sacrifices which the Veda ordains ... Let the student persist constantly in such begging, but let him not eat the allowance of food for one person. The subsistence of a student by begging, is held equal to fasting in religious merit. Yet, when he is asked on a solemn occasion, in honour of the Gods, or the Manes, he may eat at his pleasure the food of a single person ; observing, however, the laws of abstinence, and the austerity of an anchorite; thus the rule of his order is kept inviolate. ... Let the scholar, when commanded by his teacher, and even when he has received no command, always exert himself in reading, and in all acts useful to his teacher.[3]

Now follow particular directions about how he is to stand before his teacher, with a variety of minor matters, all painfully detailed, and all to be very strictly attended to through several years, — until the student-career has ended.

During the second quarter of his life the Brahmin was ordered to marry, and live with his wife and family. He was at liberty to enjoy the good things of life without much restraint; but he had to attend with regularity to his devotions, and cared not cease from charity, or from giving advice to all who asked it. During the third portion of his life he was to return to his meditation and fasting; but during the fourth and last period, he was again free, as during the second, and could once more rejoice and be glad.

The forms of prayer and study, the forms of fasting and meditation, as described in the old books are curious, and highly interesting to the philosopher; but are of no great practical value in modern times, seeing that the Brahmin of the nineteenth century is quite as much opposed in his life and studies to the Brahmin of the old Books — Vedas and Codes — as is the Christian of our times, to the theoretical Christian of the New Testament, and the Christians of the first three centuries. The modern Brahmin is a man of business, and his Caste forms a nation which follows all kinds of secular

[3] Menu, ii., 175–191 (page numbers are just approximations as original source is unreadable).

pursuits. By the Laws of MENU they arc allowed to usurp the offices of the military, mercantile, and agricultural Castes, and may even perform for a living the duties of some divisions of the "Burren Sunker," or mixed class, a bastard fifth Caste; and so fully have they availed themselves of the license, that they fill the posts of artisan, cook, printer, & co., and are employed by Europeans for a great variety of purposes. Thus it is only nominally the old forms remain, although in many parts of India, there is quite as much care about purity of Caste as ever, and many, who are legally impure, have a great horror of everything which impairs Caste-purity.

We have named the "Burren Sunker," or bastard fifth class. This Caste is the result of mixed marriages. The sons of a Brahmin, and a Sudra, or Veisya, or Cshatrya woman have a fixed position and allotted duties — and so with all the forms in which the various Castes may mingle, and have children — they are chiefly artisans, and fill, in fact, those places in modern society, follow those occupations which were not needed, or even conceived, when the four caste system was first called into existence, and the duties stated.

But are we to attribute this division into Castes to some primitive religious ideas? Certainly not; but simply to conquest, and the political circumstances then operating. The divisions were civil, and continued so for many ages, until the religious ideas were reduced into form, were written out and systematised, and then a religious sanction was given to the existing institutions. The idea did not originate with Menu, or with any of the great lawgivers — it resulted from the same causes that created the serf, citizen, noble, and priestly, classes in Europe ; but when a religious sanction was imparted to the idea, it was sufficiently strengthened to maintain itself, through long ages, as a theory of human society which could not be righteously opposed. And may we not add, that, as a theory, it has proved to be the heaviest curse that has descended upon the Hindoo people? Remove that theory; and the Hindoo will live and flourish as well as any nation now upon the face of the earth.